Advertising and Branding Strategies for Sector-Specific Academic Programmes in India

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Introduction

The supply side of India's expansive higher education sector consists of over 1000 universities, 42000+ colleges and nearly 12000 stand-along institutions. These higher education institutions (HEIs) cater to over 38.5 million students across the country (AISHE, 2021). As a result, institutions have to compete across multiple facets like student enrolment, placements, funding and placements. Even sectoral universities, which cater to a niche industry or specific programmes face stiff competition from similar programmes offered across the country given the sheer size of the higher education sector.

Since sectoral programmes cater to a specific sector by definition, the value propositions of sectoral HEIs are inherently different from universities offering generalized programmes. Specialized programmes often are structured to include academic components including domain specific subjects and industrial visits designed to build sectoral expertise in students. However, in doing so, institutions narrow down both the pool of potentially interested students and options for placements. Sectoral HEIs would have to then contemplate on how they could position themselves so that they attract students.

The Indian higher education sector is at the brink of a new era driven by the National Education Policy 2020, which seeks to bring in a number of key changes, one of which is consolidation of universities. The consolidation exercise is expected to result in HEIs with a total of over 3000 students across all its programmes in all years. The NEP also places focus on creating a vibrant, multi-disciplinary ecosystem, which will seek to eliminate the rigid barriers of domain-specific expertise (National Education Policy, 2020). This is also in line with the real-world challenges which require a multi-disciplinary approach to problem solving. The years to come would require sectoral HEIs to adapt to key policy changes, re-work their academic offerings and most importantly re-imagine their engagement with their stakeholders, including students.

This research project would seek to build a whole picture how sectoral HEIs navigate this challenge and maintain competitiveness in the Indian context.

Review of Literature

Research covering various aspects of University branding and marketing has been carried out in various national and sub-national contexts.

The study (Kawpong Polyorat, 2020) tests the hypothesized relationships between university personality, university identification and university distinctiveness in Thailand. The study revealed that aspects like sincerity and liveliness do influence the distinctiveness and identification of the university, while aspects like prestige, appeal, conscientiousness and cosmopolitan image do not contribute much in building a unique brand.

In contrast, the study (Gulluce, Yilmaz, & Kaygin, 2016) concluded that the most deterministic factor for university selection is the location of the university. Other aspects like knowledge, opportunity, prestige, campus and cost of living were also found to be important aspects. A key research area recommended in the (Kawpong Polyorat, 2020) and not considered in (Gulluce, Yilmaz, & Kaygin, 2016) is the influence of social media in building a university image.

Studies also examined the role of brand logos in defining a unique persona for the university. The study (Mogaji, 2019) concluded that the university logos are an essential distinguishing factor and do provide a competitive advantage. The paper also examined the integration of the branding elements across the University websites, social media pages and other media including print media. The study recommended the adoption of common branding elements across the university profile and communications. A similar study (Shahnaz & Qadir, 2020) explored the variations in the logos, mottos and slogans across a sample of public and private Universities in Pakistan. A key finding reported in the study was the decline in the use of Islamic design elements and Quran verses across Universities established pre-70s and post-70s. The need of universities to evolve their brand image to changing times is clearly reflected in this trend.

A key change seen in the higher education sector world-wide is the increased uptake of online education which are set to compete with traditional programmes. The paper (Tucker & Angela, 2019) recommends reframing marketing strategies for online programmes, while looking at the marketing mix from a new perspective –the 4 S model. The 4 S model focuses on solution, sacrifice, situation and social media. The paper makes a statement that students are no longer enamoured by the college experience and models that require less time on campuses are evolving. The conclusion reached at in the study would be interesting to examine in the Indian context and especially for sectoral programmes. Since sectoral programmes promise a deeper understanding of the sector and generally integrate more hands-on components in their curriculum and pedagogy, the current project would serve to validate the claim that students are gravitating towards lower amount of time spent in campuses and do not find the social experience valuable.

The study (Clark, Chapleo, & Suomi, 2019) seeks to shed some light on the practices of internal branding followed at a large Canadian University. The study concludes that internal branding has a valuable role in the brand management of the University. The study also debated the option of centralized branding versus allowing constituent schools to undertake their own branding autonomously. However, the respondents in the study indicated their preference towards a centralized model to allow for "cleaner" communications, increased resources for marketing and a consistent brand image. However, the study also documented the challenges of clearly communicating the value propositions offered by the constituent schools/ faculties in a centralized setup.

In contrast, the study (Sjögren & Trautmann, 2019) found that universities have intangible and convoluted product offerings. The study also reports that constituent schools of the university often undertake sub-branding since they are required to pursue and target different segments of customers. The study acknowledges that sub-branding results in services that are less tangible and therefore create dissonance in the minds of the customers.

While there is a good amount of visibility of marketing campaigns of various sectoral HEIs across print and social media, there has been limited contribution in terms of research on marketing strategies adopted by sectoral Universities in India. **In terms of University branding, there are only a limited number of recent studies which captures branding strategies adopted by universities.** The study (Amitha S & Akhila M Paniker , 2019) provides insights into the challenges in branding in the Indian context and recommends the Higher Education Brand Touchpoint Wheel as a strong conceptual model to build a powerful brand image.

The concept of the Higher Education Brand touchpoint wheel was introduced by (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014) as a version of the Brand Touchpoint Wheel (Scott Davis, 2002) tailored to HEIs. The touchpoint wheel provides a framework for communicating key value propositions to students at

various points in the lifecycle of being engaged with a HEI. The study also recommends future research based on certain touchpoints not included in the study, like Governance and Leadership, social media and alumni.

Need/ Significance of the study

India's vast higher education ecosystem continues to become more competitive as a number of new institutions are established across the country. The favourable perception universities build among their stakeholders helps in improving the performance of the institution in terms of academic outcomes, attracting talent and students, financial viability, peer-recognition and many other aspects. The marketing and branding of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) thus becomes a key aspect of operations, resulting in a unique positioning and better public perception.

This research project will elucidate the factors that lead to creation of a strong brand image for a sectoral university.

Objectives of the study

The study project would serve to elucidate key concepts of marketing and branding in context of programmes which cater to specific sectors with a view to address key knowledge gaps identified in the existing literature. The study aims to empower institutes offering niche programmes to excel in the competitive higher education sector in India with know-how of marketing and branding perspectives.

Based on key gaps identified in the literature review, the study would aim to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the key factors that define the personality and distinctiveness of a sectoral University from students perspective?
2) Which value propositions/ factors do sectoral universities focus more upon from a branding perspective? How is it different from regular universities?
3) Is there a relation between the prioritized value propositions/ factors and university features like years in operation, enrolment size, ranking etc?
4) Which value propositions/ factors are more important from a students' perspective for a sectoral university?
5) What is the role of social media in influencing students' decision to opt for a niche programme?

Research Methodology

Approach

The study project would seek to evaluate the components listed in the brand touchpoint wheel in (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014) covering factors such as infrastructure, notable alumni, current students, media influence, placement statistics, fees among others. As recommended in the referenced study, additional factors related to governance, public ranking, social media profiles etc will also be included as factors to be evaluated from the students' and the universities' perspective. The components that are prioritised by the universities and the components preferred by students would be identified, which would help arrive at marketing gaps.

Addressing these specific marketing gaps would enable sectoral universities put forth a more coherent and consonant marketing campaign to attract students. The components that form a unique brand identity from the students' perspective would be identified to offer managerial insights on building a strong niche brand.

The components unique to a sectoral programme would be identified to understand which features or value propositions stand out while marketing a niche sectoral programme.

The influence of structural features on components prioritized by the universities would also be studied to offer insights on how structural features like number of years of existence, structure of marketing departments, status of ownership, NIRF ranking, accreditation status among others.

Methodology and Data Collection

The research would rely on both qualitative and quantitative methods following a cross-sectional design to arrive at appropriate answers to the research questions listed above. The study would involve sharing a structured questionnaire with students and university officials in leadership positions to understand the marketing and branding practices and experiences. In order to reduce the "sampling fatigue" from information sharing on the part of university officials, the research would also rely on secondary sources of data, including data available from higher education authority public portals and accrediting bodies. Lastly, the study would attempt to document interesting anecdotal findings or good practices followed across the universities for marketing and branding in the form of case studies.

Sources of Primary data

Primary data would be collected from students and university officials on their experience with sector specific programmes through the following study instruments:

Sl no	Instrument type	Students enrolled in General Programmes (Comparison group)	Students enrolled in Sectoral Programmes (Experiment Group)	University officials- Sectoral University	University officials- General University
1	Structured questionnaire	✓	✓	✓	
2	In-depth Interview			✓	
3	Focus Group discussion	✓	✓		

The study would collect data on preferred value propositions by students and universities on a scale similar to the 5-point Likert scale along with information related to information consumption/dissemination on various media sources including social media.

The data would be collected from two groups of students- those enrolled in general programmes and those enrolled in sectoral programmes for comparison of preferences and identifying distinguishing features for a sectoral programme. The study would also collect some basic details of the student backgrounds to understand if there is a variation in the preferences across various socio-economic groups. The structured questionnaire data would be collected through online forms.

The primary data collected in the form of structured questionnaires would be supported by the information provided by students and university officials. The information collected as part of the discussions would help understand the motivations and thought processes leading to the respective preferences which may help dissect the information further for more useful insights.

Similar to students, information would be collected across sectoral universities and general university to isolate components critical in forming brand image for sectoral university.

Sources of Secondary data

The Secondary sources of data would allow for accurate capture of data related to the placements, number of students, enrolment details and other valuable data points useful for the study. A summary of the information proposed to be collected as part of the project includes, but is not limited to the following:

Sl. No	Source of data	Information / data to be accessed
1	All India Survey On Higher Education (AISHE)	Enrolment, graduation outcomes, Income and expenditure, Infrastructure, scholarships, financial support, accreditation status, ownership status, autonomy status etc.
2	National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)	Placements, No of Faculty, CAPEX and OPEX, infrastructure maintenance costs, component scores across various ranking parameters.
3	University websites	Programme structure, fee structures, programme USPs, Industry linkages, governance and leadership, media reports
4	Social media pages	Likes, comments, frequency of response/ interaction, frequency of posts

Data Analysis and presentation of findings

Data preparation and cleaning

The data collected through online forms would first be checked and validated for consistency. The data would undergo some basic checks including range checks, typing errors, permissible values, internal consistency checks etc. to arrive at a clean dataset for further analysis.

The information collected through focus group discussions would be transcribed and summarized for easy reference and access during the course of writing the thesis.

Data analysis and presentation

The data sets would be compiled in MS Office suite applications, including word, excel and power BI. Following the population of these datasets, the analysis would be done using IBM-SPSS, using features related to factor analysis and regression models. The data analysed would be presented in an-easy to understand format in a presentation detailing the topline findings and the final findings post review by the research committee and the faculty guide.

Thesis Outline

The final thesis would be documented in MS word following the structure detailed below:

Chapter No.	Chapter Title
1	**Introduction**
1.1	Evolution of the Higher Education Sector in India
1.2	Implications of the National Education Policy 2020
1.3	Overview Niche sectoral programmes in India
1.4	Justification and need for the study
2	**Literature review**
3	**Approach and Methodology**
3.1	Approach
3.1.1	Research objectives
3.1.2	Key information areas
3.2	**Methodology**
3.3	Description of Study Instruments used
3.3	Hypotheses to be examined
3.4	Sampling methods
3.5	Limitations of the study
4	**Analysis of findings**
4.1	Sample description and characteristics
4.2	Findings on Students' perspective of branding
4.3	Findings on Universities' perspective of branding
4.4	Key marketing gaps and difference in perspectives
4.5	Components critical to establishing a university brand
4.6	Variations across niche programmes and mass programmes
4.7	Influence of structural features on University branding
4.8	Influence of social media on students' perspectives
5	**Conclusions and Recommendations**
5.1	Research Implications
5.2	Managerial Implications
5.3	Areas for further research
6	**References**

Project work plan

The project would be completed in 4 phases viz- the preparatory phase, the data collection phase, analysis phase and finalization of the thesis over the proposed duration of 2 years (24 months) each of the phases is expected to last around 5-6 months, culminating in the final thesis submitted for examination.

	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4	M 5	M 6	M 7	M 8	M 9	M 10	M 11	M 12	M 13	M 14	M 15	M 16	M 17	M 18	M 19	M 20	M 21	M 22	M 23	M 24
Preparatory Phase																								
Finalizing research study design/ research questions																								
Documentation of Chapter-1 Introduction																								
Advanced literature study																								
Documentation of Chapter-2 Literature Review																								
Finalizing Approach and methodology																								
Documentation of Chapter-3 Approach and Methodology																								
Data Collection Phase																								
Collection of secondary data																								
Pilot of tools for primary data collection																								
Finalizing tools for primary data collection																								
Prepare and finalize data collection plan																								
Primary data collection																								
Data preparation and cleaning																								
Analysis Phase																								
Data analysis																								
Presentation of topline findings																								

	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4	M 5	M 6	M 7	M 8	M 9	M 10	M 11	M 12	M 13	M 14	M 15	M 16	M 17	M 18	M 19	M 20	M 21	M 22	M 23	M 24
Presentation of study findings																								
Documentation of Chapter 4- Analysis of findings																								
Documentation of Chapter 4- Conclusions and Recommendations																								
Finalization of thesis																								
Proof reading and correction of chapter drafts																								
Submission of 1st Draft of Thesis																								
Review and feedback from faculty guide																								
Submission of Final Thesis document for examination																								

The activities have been planned to allow for sufficient time for review and provide a buffer against situations beyond the researcher's control. The workplan details the specific milestones against the completion of thesis chapters.

Scope and Limitation of the study

Scope

The study would seek to uncover importance of factors such as infrastructure, notable alumni, current students, media influence, placement statistics, fees among others across students and university management to understand gaps in messaging and information consumption.

Limitations

The study would involve a structured questionnaire administered to student groups across sectoral universities and general universities. The students responding to the survey questionnaire may not represent the whole population, given the inherent difference in students' access to devices, internet and availability given their academic responsibilities. Efforts would be made to ensure the study tools reach a diverse group of students to the extent possible.

For the tools to be administered to Universities, it is possible that due to non-availability and non-response, the study may suffer sampling casualties. It is also possible that the non-availability and non-response to the study is not due to random factors but due to specific issues. Issues like non-maintenance of records, lack of focus on institutional development, lack of transparency arising from poor performance of the institution on certain parameters may lead to some cases of non-response.

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Signature of

Research Scholar

Signature of

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